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“WE DESERVE A BUTTERFLY”: THE REVERSAL OF THE POST-COLONIAL SELF IN DAVID HENRY HWANG’S *M. BUTTERFLY*

I

The purpose of this paper is to explore the shift of the paradigm of the post-colonial Self in David Henry Hwang’s 1988 drama *M. Butterfly*. While Hwang’s play offering a postmodern rendition of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* (1904) has been analyzed from numerous vantage points, I am primarily fascinated by the reversal of the original characters, that is, how a classic encounter between East and West is twisted around both sexually and culturally. My exploration of the identity shift commemorated in the drama rests on two pillars, the notion of the Self, as defined by Sartre, and Sura P. Rath’s concept of the home. The application of the abovementioned theoretical apparatus will be complemented by the examination of the drama’s semiotic context, along with an inquiry into the othering process demonstrated in the play.

II

In Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943), a tripartite concept of the Self is envisioned. “Being for Itself” expresses the knowing consciousness, or the sum-total of I, the Historicized Self, “Being for Others” is the Mirrored Self showing how one’s existence is reflected

by the surrounding human microcosm and “Being in the World” denotes the Splintered Self, or the Self’s consciousness of the world amounting to a plethora of incomplete Selves (Tordai 244–250). While these components are present in the psyche of all human beings, the colonial and post-colonial mindset established a different prioritizing system. The colonial primarily seen as a stereotype appears as a victim, a person deprived of agency. Since s/he is described by the colonizer, (s)he is unable to alter his/her situation substantially. In the case of the Asian identity “Being for Others” and “Being in the World” dominates. The description of Asian characters in Western literature is impacted by objectification or stereotyping, suffice to refer to the “John Chinaman,” or “Gunga Din” concepts encompassing servility and ignorance, and to the images of “Suzy Wong” conveying the sexually submissive, yet innocent consort, along with “Ahmah,” projecting the Asian equivalent of the Mammy (Major 4–8). As Sartre indicates, “Being in the World” includes the infinite possibilities of Selves, frustrated by this very incompleteness. The colonial Self is restricted from self-realization and actualization. The post-colonial Self, on the other hand, is not a stereotype, it emphasizes the “Being for Itself” stage at the expense of the other two.

While at first glance Sartre’s approach, especially in light of the efforts of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Leela Ghandi appears obsolete, I believe his commitment to the fight against objectification, a crucial component of the colonial relationship, and his impassionate stance against colonization, namely the French occupation of Algiers, make his theoretical model an apt research tool. Furthermore, as Irmscher recognizes, the protagonist of Hwang’s play carries the name of a famous French publishing house (625), as Gallimard Publishing, among others is the disseminator of Sartre’s most important works.

Rath’s three-part concept of the home is also instructive. “Home” can appear spatially described by Dorinne Kondo as “a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders, it stands for community” (qtd. in Rath 10), or as a collection of memories, an imaginary community. In the temporal dimension home can function as the assortment of public myths and private memories, a collection of histories. Home can be seen as a virtual third space suggesting a belonging to two or more cultural domains, or viewed by Homi

Bhabha, a “ hybrid location of perpetual tension, antagonism, and pregnant chaos” (qtd. in Rath 10). The post-colonial mindset is placed in a third space, encompassing both the colonial and post-colonial heritage. Jessica Hagedorn describes it as such: “When I think of home now I mean three places. San Francisco Bay area really colored my work. New York is where I live. But Manila will always have a hold on me. I really don’t think of myself as a citizen of one country but as a citizen of the world” (100).

In *M. Butterfly* both the notion of the Self and the concept of home gain a new interpretation. The drama testifies to the intercultural efforts of the playwright as Hwang totally abandons the American scene and locates his heroes in France and China. Inspired by a story overheard at a party concerning a relationship between a French diplomat and a male Chinese spy masquerading as a woman, Hwang presents an updated version of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. The story can indeed be observed from two angles and it appears to offer two protagonists, Rene Gallimard, the French diplomat, and Song Liling, the Chinese spy. Also it operates on two levels, the actual plot and the imprisoned Gallimard awaiting his trial on the charge of treason recalling his ill-starred relationship with Song-Liling. Gallimard is modeled on a real French diplomat, Bernard Bouriscot who being stationed in China in the 1950’s, fell in love with a Chinese spy assuming the identity of a female opera singer. While describing this relationship the playwright provides a parallel with Puccini’s opera, and/or the Butterfly myth. Gallimard searching for the stereotypical Asian woman offering her unconditional love to a Westerner is an ardent believer in the myth of Madame Butterfly:

There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women is chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils. Who are born and raised to be the perfect women. Who take whatever punishment we give them, and bounce back, strengthened by love, unconditionally. It is a vision that has become my life. (2868)

The drama raises several troubling questions. One concerns Gallimard’s motivation upon entering this relationship. Given the situation of a French or European man stationed in the Far East, two domains of collective unconscious clash. Gallimard, infected with

Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and a desire to dominate is on the search for the stereotypical Suzy Wong. For him this relationship offers a chance of redemption, a new start. Frustrated by the assertive and threatening presence of western women, including his wife Helga, and his lover Renee, he searches for the realization of his unconscious goals.

But as she glides past him, beautiful, laughing softly behind her fan, don't we who are men sigh with hope? We, who are not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful, yet somehow believe, like Pinkerton, that we deserve a Butterfly. (2828)

During the drama Gallimard is put on trial for several reasons. One is his obvious treason, as he is accused of passing military and diplomatic secrets to the Chinese, the second charge against him is leveled by the outside world for his ignorance, and the last point of his indictment singles him out for his domineering relationship with women. The drama also examines the issue of victimization occurring both on the physical and metaphysical level. Actual victimization denotes the mutual deception described in the play. Gallimard deceives Song, as his infatuation is not an honest one, but the product of a prejudice-formed mindset. Furthermore, he uses his relationship to his own advantage as his "native mistress" opens the way to a higher assignment. On the other hand, Song's deception of Gallimard is a total one, as not only is he not an opera singer, but a man impersonating a woman. Furthermore, the fraud goes so far, that Gallimard is made to believe to have sired a child. Metaphysical victimization occurs when stereotypes mutually held and nurtured by the characters clash. Gallimard conditioned by his European background arrives in the Far East with prefabricated images, and Song is not immune to seeing Westerners in disfigured concepts either as he refers to European females as "pasty big-thighed white women," (2835) or envisions France, or Paris, as a home of "cappuccinos, men in tuxedos and bad expatriate jazz"(2834).

Objectification, viewed by Sartre as the basic source of all human conflicts (Tordai 22), is a crucial component of the drama as well. Demonstrated by his pleasure in achieving dominance over women via pornography, and through his belief in the Butterfly myth, Gallimard objectifies European and Asian women. He identifies

European women with pin-up girls and Asian ones with lotus blossoms. Furthermore, not only the Chinese, but the French as well are viewed in the form of stereotypes, suffice to refer to the jeering public comments about Gallimard's affair "Well, I thought the French were ladies' men" (2825). Helga, Gallimard's wife also thinks of other non-Europeans, Australians, in stereotypical terms: "My father was an ambassador to Australia. I grew up among criminals and kangaroos" (2830). Also, Renee "a schoolgirl who would question the role of the penis in modern society" (2852) objectifies Gallimard as she openly deconstructs the primary signifier of manhood: "...it just hangs there. This little...flap of flesh. And there's so much fuss that we make about it" (2851). Gallimard objectifies his own people as well: "Well, I hate the French. Who just smell—period!" (2860) or offers a generalized description of Parisians as arrogant. Finally Song at Gallimard's trial presents a potent summary of mutual stereotyping and objectification:

The West thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor...but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom—the feminine mystique (2864).

It is in this background of mutual deception, victimization, and stereotyping that the notion of the post-colonial self evolves. The application of Sartre's theory to Gallimard yields the following results. Gallimard's Historicized Self amounts to a frustrated, middle-aged, European career diplomat historically, culturally, and psychologically conditioned to view the relationship of Europeans to non-Westerners in the framework of domination and submission. Gallimard's "Being for Others" can be broken into several "Others," including his family, his employer, French society and the principal Other, Song. Gallimard's wife, Helga is aware of her husband's extramarital affairs, but is willing to overlook them in return for enjoying the obvious benefits life can offer to a diplomat's spouse. Toulon, Gallimard's superior, at first rewards him for being an industrious employee then presides at his trial, French society sees him as a pathetic dupe, and Song considers him no more than an assignment. Gallimard's "Being in the World", or the Splintered or unrealized Self, is generated as a consequence of being stifled by aggressive, almost masculine women, by the constraints of being a

European exposed to the mysteries of the Far East, and by his inability to understand the other sex.

Home as the imaginary community partly exists in Gallimard's relationship with his wife Helga, and in his friendship with Marc. Home on the temporal sphere encompassing public myths and private memories is represented by Gallimard's attachment to the Butterfly myth along with his encounters with the pinup girl and his former lover, Renee. Gallimard occupies a third space, a virtual home, partly by acting as Pinkerton in the Madame Butterfly story, and by the very fact that he enters the myth. This third space is located in between the domains of the European male and the Asian female. Due to Song's cruel deception of Renee, however, this home indeed turns out to be a virtual one.

The object of Gallimard's desire, Song Liling's character can also be analyzed according to Sartre's theory. His "Being for Itself," or the sum total of Song's I includes an individual deprived of his will, a person forced to play a farcical role, an Easterner burdened by stereotypical thinking, and a frustrated human being attempting to cope with his sexual orientation. Song's "Being for Others" also serves several audiences including Chinese society, the West, and his principal Other, Gallimard himself. Chinese society treats him with disdain and marginalizes him, the West considers him as the stereotypical effeminate Asian male, and Gallimard views him as the embodiment of the quintessential Asian female.

Marginalized and stigmatized, Song is homeless and deprived of an imaginary community. As far as home on the temporal sphere is concerned, while Gallimard and Song both share the Butterfly myth, they approach it from differing vantage points. While Gallimard praises the sacrifice of Cho Cho San, Song sees it as a symbol of the subjection of Asian women and considers it ridiculous. It is noteworthy, however, that Song eventually moves to France, thus invades the spatial home of Gallimard. By moving to the West, Song feels the alienation and separation from his home and indeed is forced into a third space seeing his own people in stereotypes emphasizing their stinginess.

The relationship between Gallimard and Song can be compared to 19th century blackface minstrelsy in America, a logonomic system, or a coded discourse of dominance "describing social semiotic behaviors

at the point of production and reception which also reflect the contradictions and conflicts in the (given) social formation” (Hodge and Kress qtd. in Varró 57). In any logonomic system the producer of the discourse enjoys dominance over the receiver, and the discourse itself is conditioned socially, culturally, and psychologically.

If we take Varró’s conviction that logonomic systems function as semiotic constructs in which the message and discourse are conditioned, initiated, received and understood according to current power relations (57), the following conclusions can be made. The producer of the message is Song who masquerades himself as a woman. While this impersonation yields a societal microcosm, it would be too hasty to conclude that this simply means the assumption of a dominant position over a female by a male. The first microcosm is created between colonizer and colonial with Gallimard as a Westerner representing the former, Song as an Easterner standing for the latter. In addition to the years of colonization stereotyping is the other conditioning factor. Song passionately declares at the trial of Gallimard during which the French diplomat’s lack of recognition of Song’s true sexual identity is questioned, that “being an Oriental, one could never be completely a man” (2864). Song initiates the communication as a colonial subject and s/he remains in that role throughout. On the receiving end Gallimard as the representative of the colonizer accepts Song’s message, that is acting as an opera singer reciting *Madame Butterfly*, in a condescending manner, and understands it as the reaffirmation of his European and colonial superiority.

The second, yet more troubling communicational context is the sexual one, that is Song, in fact a Chinese male masquerades himself as a Chinese woman. Consequently, the deception is based on gender, not on race and the position of the producer and receiver changes since it is Gallimard, who initiates the communication. It is noteworthy, that Song and Gallimard meet at the German ambassador’s residence. It can be concluded that Song could not have directly planned to meet him there, that is, it was a chance encounter partially supported by a Chinese theatrical custom of men acting in the role of women. It is possible that Song was sent with a mission of spying, or gathering intelligence data from foreign diplomats, but the source of the coveted information could have been any diplomat, and

in fact Gallimard was the one who fell for the bait. Song could not have known about Gallimard's obsession with the Butterfly myth, as (s)he shows an honest surprise and disapproval of Gallimard's enthusiasm over the story. Therefore Gallimard as the initiator is conditioned by ethnocentrism and sexism. His impassioned statement: "I believed this girl. I believed her suffering. I wanted to take her in my arms—so delicate, even I could protect her, take her home, pamper her until she smiled" (2831) reinforces the notion of romantic paternalism. Gallimard, preoccupied with the Butterfly myth, primarily sees Song as a character from that myth, not as an opera singer.

On the receiving end Song goes along with the deception after all it is 1960, the Far East is in political turmoil, and his mission is to gain intelligence data concerning the plans of Americans in Vietnam. In this case therefore Gallimard is the producer of the discourse and Song is the receiver assigning the former a dominant position. It is Gallimard who initiates the conversation and the relationship, and the cruel irony of the situation is that he believes that he is in control, acting as the stereotypical or quintessential Western male protecting the innocent Eastern woman. His message is one of protection, and superiority, coupled with the West seeking redemption from the East: "I knew this little flower was waiting for me to call...I felt for the first time that rush of power—the absolute power of a man" (2840). Song willingly accepts this role acting as the innocent, fragile Cho Cho San "giving his shame" to Gallimard.

Gallimard at the end of the play sums up the principal semiotic context of the drama: "I'm a man who loved a woman created by a man" (2867). This statement excludes the ethnic or racial aspect and places the situation clearly on sexual grounds. This is a crucial phase because once again the position of the producer and receiver of the discourse changes. The man who creates the woman is the producer and initiator of the discourse. The fact of creation and the donning of the disguise emphasize male superiority over females paralleling the racial framework of black face minstrelsy. As Varró argues, in blackface minstrelsy the logonomic system also expresses an alternative condition, the reinforcement of existing stereotypes (68). Taken from the second half of the premise—a woman created by a man—a stereotypical, submissive, fragile, sexually accommodating

figure is brought forth and one of the reasons that Gallimard so readily accepts the projected image is that it conforms to his expectations. Also, Song's impersonation of a female suggests the subservient position of women within Asian society.

The drama also focuses on the Othering process. The strategy chosen by an Other in this case a Chinese male, is to assume the guise of another Other to dislocate the Self. The drama at the same time shows that the Self's dominant position is not unquestioned as both Helga demanding a medical checkup to establish Gallimard's ability to sire children, thereby challenging his manhood, and Renee questioning the primary signifier of masculinity threaten his status. In light of the above Gallimard's willing and clear identification with the Other appears natural. Thus Gallimard is able to project his own insecurities on this character, thereby suggesting that the fragile, inhibited person presented by Song is a parallel of not Cho Cho San, but Gallimard himself. Gallimard also attempts to escape from his Historicized Self comprised of such images as "the person least likely to be invited to a party"(2824), and being a man troubled by an inferiority complex brought on by his affair with the assertive and aggressive Renee: "but is it possible for a woman to be *too* uninhibited, *too* willing, so as to seem almost too ...masculine?" (2850) Also, the Self is psychologically reinforced as the Western Man approaches the "lotus flower" of the East. Gallimard's "Being for Others," primarily a wayward European lost in Asia, receives a much needed boost as he initiates the relationship with Song anticipating this very type of behavior.

The reversal of the post-colonial Self is completed at the climactic conclusion as Gallimard, faced with the legal consequences of the deception of his life, decides to assume the identity of Cho Cho San. While in Song's case a victimized, muted Other assumed the guise of a different subjugated Other, Gallimard, a representative of the dominant Self impersonates a marginalized Other. Having been confronted with the fact that Song is "So little like his Butterfly" (2864), Gallimard is forced to choose between fantasy and reality, and he settles for the former. The paradigm is turned around as the sexist and ethnocentric European ideology aimed at the East is now pointed at the West, and the victimizer becomes the victim with no other choice but death with honor. The stereotypes applied by the West to

Eastern women: submission, lack of imagination, and inhibition are defiantly rejected by Gallimard as Song calls him to task: "I am pure imagination. And in imagination I will remain" (2868).

III

At the beginning of the drama Gallimard appeared as a Western diplomat, a stereotypical representative of European culture possessing all the prejudicial images and ethnocentric concepts imbued by his education and upbringing. He was obsessed with the Far East, a land he only knew through stereotypes as he did not maintain any direct contact with the Chinese or other Asian people. While he categorizes all non-European cultures as the exotic Other and he enters the drama as the dominant one, he ends up in the position of the muted. In fact his personalities: Gallimard, Gallimard—Pinkerton, and Gallimard—Cho Cho San are parts of a continuum representing this process. Gallimard functions at the spatial dimension of the home marginalizing all non-European cultures, Gallimard—Pinkerton enters the temporal dimension partaking in the public myth of *Madame Butterfly* enabling him to act out his private fantasy as the American officer. Gallimard as Cho Cho San enters the virtual dimension or third space, the zone in which the post-colonial Self is prevalent. For Gallimard "Being in Itself" means the acceptance of the European male experience, "Being for Others" is strictly limited to Westerners, and "Being in the World" connotes domination. Gallimard as Pinkerton continues in the same mold in the "Being in Itself" stage, and in his "Being for Others" the racial and sexual Other appears. The fulfillment of his desires is hindered by contemporary restrictions placed on the relationship between colonial and colonizer. It is ironic that Gallimard as Cho Cho San finds his true home in the virtual third space as his Historicized Self is characterized by victimization, his "Being for Others" includes the racial and sexual Other of the opposing end of the spectrum, and "Being in the World" in her case translates to the acceptance of the deception and the achievement of internal peace he always strove for. The final cruel irony is that he pays an enormous price for the realization of his

dreams sacrificing himself in the eternal struggle against stereotyping and confirming the ultimate message of the play namely, the Other lives in all of us.

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